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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

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TAGS: PHUM SCUL PGOV PREL SOCI KIRF VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: LEGAL PROTESTANTS SEE MOVEMENT ON SEMINARY, NEW CHURCHES

Ref: A) 03 HCMC 235 B) HCMC 573 C) HANOI 1268 D) 03 HCMC 1087

1. (SBU) Several members of the Executive Board of the government-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) told the Ambassador they were moving ahead with plans for construction of a new seminary campus during a meeting last month at their offices in HCMC. The Protestant leaders complained that the current space for Vietnam's only legal Protestant seminary (which opened in February 2003 on the top two floors of the same building housing the Saigon Church and the SECV offices - ref A) was insufficient to meet students' needs. According to board members, the students receive a free education for the full four years. To qualify for acceptance, they must have a high school education plus one year of lay work experience in an SECV church. The seminary is currently limited by its GVN-approved charter to accepting one student for every five congregations within each southern province, for a total of 50 students every two years. Students must be recommended by at least one local pastor and one supervisory pastor. While the government screened the first group of candidates fairly rigorously, the SECV leaders expected next year's class to be even more carefully scrutinized, now that the GVN "knows more about the seminary" and has a better sense of which candidates to reject.

2. (SBU) The SECV hoped to build the new campus on property they own in HCMC's District 2. This larger facility would allow them to accept women as well. The current situation, with cramped facilities above the church, students housed several kilometers away from their classrooms, and the library in still another remote location, was not conducive to higher learning. The pastors told the Ambassador they would fund the construction at least partially through donations from Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) churches in the U.S. and Korea, with additional funds from local congregations. (Note: CMA sent the first Protestant missionaries to Vietnam early in the 20th Century, and the CMA denomination still dominates Protestantism in the country today. All of the churches affiliated with the SECV are CMA churches. Many other CMA churches have chosen not to affiliate with the SECV in order to avoid any semblance of what they see as GVN control. In a visit to HCMC in February, the President of the CMA Church in the U.S. made clear that the CMA prefers its overseas churches to be self-reliant and does not generally provide financial support. End note.) With approximately 1.2 million Protestants in the South, one board member said, the SECV needed to raise just one dollar from each believer. The board members asked the Ambassador for favorable consideration of visa applications by seminary students in the future, as some go overseas for advanced study. In a meeting between the Ambassador and the seminarians in an upstairs classroom, most of the questions from the excited students focused on visas as well.

3. (SBU) The board members briefed the Ambassador more generally on the current state of the SECV, noting that there are over 1000 churches and meeting points throughout the South, 372 of which are legally registered with the government and officially recognized - including 44 in HCMC, 25 in Quang Nam on the central coast, nine in Danang, 11 in Gia Lai, five in Dak Lak, one in Dak Nong, and three in Binh Phuoc. They described the current registration process as very slow, pointing out that it would take a long time at the present rate to register the 412 house churches in Dak Lak and Dak Nong, 178 in Gia Lai, 139 in Binh Phuoc, and two in Kon Tum. The SECV leaders said they had witnessed some progress over the past three years in their dealings with high-level GVN officials, but understanding of Protestantism was still minimal among provincial and lower-level officials. The board members agreed that Dak Lak was the most difficult province to deal with, largely because the local officials were "very strong." Asked for their impressions of the Easter weekend ethnic demonstrations (refs B and C), they said they had heard many stories (mostly over the Internet), with casualty figures running from 40 to 400, but were not at all clear on what had actually happened.

4. (SBU) The SECV leaders told the Ambassador they would be holding their second general conference next February -- four years after the first congress in 2001 -- as specified in their government-approved charter. The most important task of the general conference participants would be the election of new leaders. The board members seemed content with the number of bibles they were allowed to print under the current arrangement and noted the GVN's willingness to publish ethnic minority language bibles in the future. They said they had also submitted a request to publish a Protestant newsletter earlier in the year,

but had yet to hear back from the GVN about permission. Asked for their opinions on the possible consequences of designating Vietnam a country of particular concern for religious freedom, the pastors told the Ambassador that they had been approached to sign a public letter to the U.S. Congress critical of the GVN, but felt they had already made their views known to Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford during his visit here in October 2003 (ref D).

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